

**Interview with Chris Cosgriff  
conducted by Sue Kovach Shuman for the  
Providence District History Project Providence Perspective**

**Sue:** It's July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010 I am Sue Kovach Shuman and I'm talking with Chris Cosgriff about the Providence District History Project. Welcome.

**Chris:** Thank you.

**Sue:** You live in Fairfax; did you grow up here in Fairfax? And could you tell me a little bit about your age and what brought you here.

**Chris:** I'm 32 right now; I was actually born in San Diego because my dad was in the military. We moved here for the first time when I was about two, ah, lived here for about two years and then moved to Guam and then back to California and then back here finally again when I was about eight or nine; and I've been here ever since. Grew up off of Burke Station Road just outside Fairfax city in what's currently the Braddock District.

**Sue:** What schools did you attend here?

**Chris:** I went to for elementary school I went to Green Acres which is now closed and then I went for middle school to Frost and for High School to Woodson.

**Sue:** Okay, my children graduated from Woodson also, you probably know them.

**Chris:** I might.

**Sue:** Maybe. Um, now tell me a little bit about your career, what you do for a living.

**Chris:** Right now I work for Monster.com which is a one of the major internet job boards for jobs around the world. And I run some of their community websites for public service communities such as law enforcement, fire and rescue, and civilian government workers.

**Sue:** Now that's how you got into the website that you created in is it 2005?

**Chris:** No, actually I created the Officer Down Memorial Page in 1996.

**Sue:** Could you describe a little bit about what it is.

**Chris:** Sure, the Officer Down Memorial Page usually I just refer to it as ODMP is a internet based memorial for law enforcement officers who are killed in the line of duty. It dates back to the very first known in the line of duty death known in America which happened in 1791 in New York. And since that first death there's been over 20,000 law enforcement officers known to be killed in the line of duty. Um, we have biographies of every single one of them on the site that lists their name, the department they worked for the date they were killed and a synopsis of how they were killed. In addition to that we also conduct research into forgotten line of duty deaths so that those officers who have been forgotten through time can now be memorialized and remembered for their sacrifices.

**Sue:** Do you have an example of that; someone forgotten.

**Chris:** Yes, absolutely in fact one of the ones that I personally discovered in research was a Fairfax County deputy who was shot and killed in 1905. He was, you know at that time it was generally – law enforcement officers did it on the side because they were prominent citizens and they had other jobs on the side. This guy George Malcolm was actually a teacher as his full time job. And he was a teacher in Lorton at a school there and there was a railroad worker who was harassing some of his elementary level female students. He went to arrest him and got shot and killed while arresting him.

**Sue:** You said he was a school teacher but he was also a police officer part time?

**Chris:** Yeah, he was a deputy sheriff; in fact we have information from newspaper articles about when he was sworn in as a deputy in order to be, you know, law enforcement representative out in the area where he lived.

**Sue:** Tell me a little bit about the kind of research you did for this, for that sample.

**Chris:** So this one we got newspaper articles from the Washington Post from the local Fairfax newspaper, I can't remember the name of the paper. I think it was

the Fairfax Herald or something like that that actually had a partial photograph. The paper was damaged and only part of his face was shown. We also got his death certificate which showed he died in the District of Columbia because he was taken; that was where the hospital was he was taken by train to the hospital where he died. I also went to the courthouse and found where he was at the court the day he was sworn in and has his signature because he had been summoned to Vienna jury that same day. We also tracked down his grave, he's buried at Pohick Chapel right off Route 1.

**Sue:** Now when you say we who is involved with you in this project?

**Chris:** Primarily by me, but I have other researchers that I reach out to and help if I might need some guidance or some assistance in this area.

**Sue:** Are these local historians that you reach out to?

**Chris:** Yeah, you know at the Virginia Room and the Library I might what ask what resources are available. In this case after locating his grave at the church I noticed that in the same family plot there had been a recent burial in the last few years so they actually gave me the contact information of the person associated with that recent burial. I contacted them and it turns out that this was a descendant that had a real photograph of him. Had no idea that he was a law enforcement officer and had been killed in the line of duty. They knew that he was a teacher and had been shot but they didn't know he was a deputy and was trying to make an arrest. And they actually gave me his original photo which they had in their family which I still have today. Um, I contacted the sheriff's office and they actually sent out an honor guard at the anniversary of his death to memorialize him and lay a wreath. And now they consider him one of their fallen officers.

**Sue:** Am I correct in the descendants of this person had no idea that he was a law enforcement officer.

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Sue:** And you informed them.

**Chris:** Yes.

**Sue:** And what was their reaction.

**Chris:** Their reaction was they were very surprised and honored that after a hundred years basically that someone would care enough to research this and contact them. They lived down in Chesapeake at the time and their entire family came up for the memorial service. But I don't know that it was on the anniversary of his death but it was, you know they came up for it none the less. And the bagpipers and honor guard were there and it was very, very nice to meet them all and do the research with them.

**Sue:** Now you started doing this project when you were at Monster.com?

**Chris:** No.

**Sue:** What was the one thing that started you thinking of doing this kind of a project? Have you visited downtown the memorial?

**Chris:** Yeah, I have been there, I go there several times a year. When I was, you know like any boy growing up I had an interest in law enforcement; you're always amazed by police cars and policeman and stuff like that. When I was in high school I was an explorer which is, it's associated with the boy scouts. But it's a way for high school kids to get interested in law enforcement. I was an explorer with the Fairfax City police department just because it was the closest. Even though it's not in the county it was the closest police station to me. And I always wanted to be a police officer and my intent was to go to college graduate, get out and become a cop. Um, so my freshman year while I was in college that was in 1996, that was right or 1995 that was right when the internet was starting to pick up a little bit; particularly on college campuses. I taught myself how to create a website. Shortly thereafter there was an article in the Washington Post about a man in Prince Georges County, Maryland who had murdered two police officers it was in the late 1970's who was just being released from prison and the Post in my opinion was glorifying this double cop killer saying that he was a model prisoner and he was going to get out and be this amazing citizen. And, you know, I thought it was a bunch of nonsense and like most law enforcement have their perception that the main stream media only points out the bad in law enforcement and

never the good. And so I sat down and said what can I do. I'm just a snotty nosed kid and I don't have much power or anything like that but I created this website and it had an instant reaction from the law enforcement community and an instant following. That was almost 15 years ago and now it's one of the top five law enforcement websites in the Country. It has over 500,000 people a month visit the site. And it's, it's just something that has just taken on a life of its own now.

**Sue:** What are the other websites – you said one of the top 5.

**Chris:** The other websites are commercial websites – officer.com, police1.com and policelink.com.

**Sue:** Now yours is a nonprofit.

**Chris:** um hum.

**Sue:** Do you solicit funds?

**Chris:** Yeah, it is a nonprofit and it's, it's made possible through donations from visitors to the site. And also right now we're applying for a grant from the Federal Department of Justice to help us fund some enhancements to the site so that we can make it a lot better.

**Sue:** Do you regularly look at the comments and the feedback to – everyday – is it kind of not an obsession but something that you need to do to do that this is part of you?

**Chris:** Yeah, I would probably call it partial obsession and partial commitment to sort of the cause that I have taken up here. But yeah, absolutely every day, seven days a week holidays included. Checking the email, first and foremost if there is an officer killed I want to make sure that we get him on there. It doesn't matter what it is or when.

**Sue:** That you are Nationwide; something you find out

**Chris:** Yeah, anywhere nationwide all 50 states, District of Columbia, U.S. territories; including laws enforcement officers who might be in a law

enforcement position overseas such as FBI or any of the Federal agencies that might have positions in foreign countries. Even if they are killed overseas in a law enforcement capacity they are still considered eligible to be on our memorial.

**Sue:** Do you speak to local groups or do you get invited by law enforcement agencies nationwide to come speak about this?

**Chris:** Yeah, I do in fact just last month I was down at the Fairfax Police Academy; they have an annual Honor Guard Seminar where members of Honor Guards from around the country train. In fact several from Canada also come to this. It's a world renown Honor Guard put on by Lt. Ken Bain with the Fairfax County police. He's invited me down for the past several years to talk about the ODMP and the importance of what we do for the law enforcement community particularly how it relates to honor guards who have the responsibility within police departments to respond to the family needs and agency needs when an in line of duty death occurs.

**Sue:** Now this site started well before you started working at your present job; do you have feedback from your employer about this website?

**Chris:** Sure, well one of the sites that I run for monster is actually one of the other top five law enforcement websites policelink.com. And although they are two separate entities one is nonprofit that I run on the side and one is my paid job yeah there is a lot of cross over and everyone who is a member of policelink knows about the off shoot of memorial page. So there is definitely buy in they gave me a lot of leeway to tend to things I need to do for ODMP – attending events and stuff like that and they are very supportive of that.

**Sue:** Tell me have you decided definitely that you will not become a law enforcement officer?

**Chris:** No, it's always in the back of my mind. When I, like I said my intent all along was to spend the four years between high school and when I was twenty one to become you know just to go to college to kill some time until I could become a cop. But while I was there I got caught up with you know law enforcement oh excuse me I mean IT and stuff like that and it turns out cops don't

make as much as IT people and when you're young and 21 sometimes that's more important. So yeah I got caught up with that; worked in Richmond for about a year and a half at Capital One before I met my – who became my wife. Moved back up here to be – so we could be closer together she lived up here and I've just continued doing stuff always serving the law enforcement community but in a civilian capacity. But it's always in the back of my mind at some point it's something that I will probably have to do.

**Sue:** What kind of things about this area in Fairfax County this district – what things do you like and what things do you not like. You're 32 and you've spent pretty much your whole life here after 8 years old and went to college 2 hours away and came back – what do you like – what don't you like?

**Chris:** I like its' proximity to D.C., you know the historic district of D.C., particularly the museums and for me you know a history buff and particularly a researcher the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Smithsonian all these things that I use all the time in my research are within a 20 minute drive in traffic plus they are free.

**Sue:** Did you get interested in all those sources pretty much when you were in High School as part of the site?

**Chris:** No, you know not until probably after I graduated college and moved back up here and had it available. I wish that the Library of Virginia was up here instead of in Richmond; because I do a lot of Virginia specific research. And the Library of Virginia down in Richmond has all those resources but that's a two hour drive so that's one of the things I don't like.

**Sue:** The Library of Virginia is different from the Virginia Historical Society right?

**Chris:** Yes, The Library of Virginia is an actual agency of the State of Virginia.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Chris:** And they are stewards of all official records within the state; death records, County and Court records, City Court records, things like that. Plus they have the

most comprehensive microfilm newspaper, Virginia newspapers on microfilm in the state.

**Sue:** Does your present job give you the flexibility to go down there during the week perhaps?

**Chris:** No

**Sue:** No

**Chris:** No, that, you know all the research I do is on my own time.

**Sue:** Okay. And the site itself is yours' not monsters.

**Chris:** Yes, yeah, yeah the site itself is in no way connected to monster; other than the fact that I happen to work there.

**Sue:** Okay. Now tell me a little bit about the things you don't like about this area. Or is there anything?

**Chris:** I don't like the traffic you know that I don't like the heat in August. It gets a little hot. But really I'm a Fairfax kid. I do feel that some of the development is taking over particularly close to me things are obviously more expensive now. I would like some aspect of it to remain a little more rural and it's become – you know there's really no area of Fairfax that could be considered rural anymore. But you know it would be nice to have some of the old homesteads where people lived there a hundred years and stuff like that. And I feel like those are the things we are losing as the county gets taken over with development and people move in and out of the city that still want to be close.

**Sue:** Do you own a house?

**Chris:** I own a townhouse, yeah.

**Sue:** Okay, when you were looking were you looking at old houses?

**Chris:** Yeah, we are always looking at old houses; we, I particularly like the area we live now because we live close to some family that I have who still live up



here. You know I know this is about Fairfax County but I have a particular affinity to Fairfax City even though I've never lived there. It's very close to there, close to the Courthouse close to everything that I need or usually do in my daily life.

**Sue:** Okay, do you get involved in any other community things; it sounds like you have not only a demanding job but this is something – your passion – the website. Do you besides speaking to law enforcement people belong to any other community, business, church, school groups that you regularly speak to get

**Chris:** I wouldn't say I speak to; my wife and I belong to Fairfax Community Church off Braddock Road. We, you know, go there; she's she definitely has more time to, you know, participate in some of their events and help with some planning than I do. I would love to be able to do more but you know I spend most of my volunteer time working within the law enforcement circle and particularly with you know my organization. I do help out each year during police week in May, when "Concerns of Police Survivors" is in town, to tend to the needs of all the survivors who are in town for police week. And I usually volunteer down there for a few days to make sure that survivors who are coming into town get everything they need. It's usually pretty much a long time for them and they need somebody who is familiar with the process to show them around and walk them around and guide them through the whole week.

**Sue:** Do you help them also with hotels and just generally with information.

**Chris:** Well yeah we do that through the website, "Concerns of Police Survivors" is really the organization that handles the hotels and all that stuff. I go down there and you know help out with some of the planning and some of the events and meet survivors who are familiar with my work through ODMP.

**Sue:** Are there other people in this area – other police officers and families of survivors who come down each year who are involved with this?

**Chris:** Oh yes, I mean there is police week down in D.C. at the National Memorial. You know there are 30,000 police officers there during the week. And because the proximity a large number of those are from the D.C. Metropolitan area or within a few hour drive. So there are many people that I know that go down

there, and you know I see them and sometimes it's their first time down there so I sort of give them the tips about where to go and what to see and when to go see so there're avoiding some of the crowds and stuff like that.

**Sue:** So you help them navigate Washington while they are here.

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Sue:** What kind of changes would you like to see in this area? What would you like to see here say in 30 years that is not in this area now? Whether it be transportation related or housing or development or a cultural thing?

**Chris:** Ah yeah I mean I think that the county itself could probably use a few more museums stuff again I have a particular affinity towards history.

**Sue:** But you didn't study history.

**Chris:** No.

**Sue:** Okay.

**Chris:** No, I was a technology major. I think you know now that I have two children it's amazing how few children related businesses are here. It's hard to find things that are reasonably priced and easily accessible.

**Sue:** Children related businesses?

**Chris:** You know like a children's museum or you know something other than Chuckie Cheese or things like that you know; maybe some more water parks. The county has done a great job over the last few years of converting some of the old rec centers into child friendly places but we are in Fairfax City and the closest one is Cub Run way out in Chantilly; and unless you go first thing on Saturday morning you have to sit in traffic for an hour just to get there. You know and then sit in traffic on the way back. So it would be nice if some of these child friendly things were a little more accessible particularly for the younger children. But you know go cart stuff just the things that I remember growing up. And back then we still had to drive a pretty good distance to get to you know we had to go way out to Manassas to go to the water park or we had to go to Cameron Run for the go

carts which is now closed. It would just be nice to get more kid friendly things closer for my family. And I know that in talking to all my peers who have kids its one of the things that they complain about too is there just doesn't seem to be enough.

**Sue:** Without going downtown

**Chris:** Yeah.

**Sue:** for a long distance. Well perhaps that's something you could gain interest in in the future.

**Chris:** Perhaps.

**Sue:** Is there anything you want to tell me about the website or your childhood or this area that I haven't asked you that you would like to go into part of this history project.

**Chris:** Well you know to get to the website and I hope that it's still around long after I'm gone. The website address is ODMP.org. Like I mentioned before it gets about currently between five hundred and six hundred thousand people a month visit the site. So everyone is welcome it's not only for law enforcement visitors it's for the everyday citizen it serves the purpose of not only memorializing these officers but educating citizens about the dangers law enforcement officers face. Particularly – many people have the misconception that the leading cause of line of duty deaths are felonious shooting deaths but the reality is most of them actually happen in automobile accidents which involve regular citizens who aren't criminals and never intend to kill a cop but they run a red light or they don't pay attention and hit a cop who is on a traffic stop on the side of the road. So you know we want to educate citizens about you know this could happen to you if you aren't paying attention. So you know always follow the traffic laws so when you see a cop on a traffic stop on the side of the road move over. In fact it's the law in Virginia and other states now that you have to either move over at least one lane of traffic or slowdown 10 miles an hour under the speed limit if you're not able to move over. So those are the things that the site is there for the everyday citizen is to educate about the dangers of law enforcement and try to help them.

**Sue:** It sounds like you have some ideas for expansion of it – maybe eventually from what you are saying.

**Chris:** Yeah, one of the other things that we are going to expand soon, hopefully by the end of this year that citizens can participate in is having then the ability to contact the parole boards to request that parole is denied to cop killers. And have it done in a relatively easy way; so that whenever a cop killer is coming up for parole anywhere in the Country we can, they can generate a letter from – right from the website that has all the contact information for the parole board, the prisoners name and everything that's necessary for them to print it out and sign it and slap a stamp on there and send it off. And generally when parole boards hear from citizens and a lot of people from the community they respond to that.

So anything that we can do to keep cop killers behind bars longer and serve their full sentences we want to do and we want to make it easy for people to participate in.

**Sue:** Sounds as if you are already speaking like a police officer, or perhaps an attorney representing.

**Chris:** Well I'm just someone who cares and thinks that the justice system probably isn't tough enough on those who deserve to really be locked up for good.

**Sue:** Okay, thank you very much.

**Chris:** Thank you.